

December 16, 1994

Reflections on yesterday's discussion (from 3 to 5:15 PM) with Mike Neufeld and Tom Crouch, curators of the Enola Gay exhibit (along with Steve Soder, assistant to Martin Harwit):

This exhibit is a scandal for the Smithsonian. Bending to the institutional interests of the Air Force--allied with uninformed, long-indoctrinated veterans with a heavy emotional investment in a personal and national myth (that their own lives were saved by the bomb, and that they have a right to feel grateful about this despite the destruction of "enemy" lives)--they are presenting a long and elaborate commercial for nuclear weapons, in the form of a celebration of the first models and their spectacular humanitarian success as life-savers, on balance. (No hint is given that anyone has ever suggested that many officials at the time believed, on evidence, that there were other ways to bring about Japanese surrender without invasion, perhaps much earlier, with a smaller or no cost in lives, or that postwar information indicates that they might well have been right).

The version of "history" presented bears the same relation to historical truth-seeking as a criminal defense brief: though actually, such a brief in an adversarial proceeding, expecting vigorous cross-examination and opposing argument, is usually more careful to guard against actual falsehood or too-blatant omission of crucial issues.

A better analogy is public relations statements (not even, testimony under oath before a hostile committee) by a tobacco company spokespersons or in a paid advertisement. Or by asbestos companies (before exposure of the dangers). Or advertisements for Ford Pintos (likewise). The comparison to such products reflects the fact that what is being sold here is nuclear weaponry, and their use in war, on people. The sub-text here, which has not been missed by a larger audience over the years, is: "Every country needs these" (especially if your neighbor might respond to the same ad).

How can these museum curators have responded to such ignorant or anti-intellectual political pressures in a way that would be normal if they were working for an advertising or public relations agency? (Or a "dirty" political campaign). Or the Department of Defense, Have they managed to maintain any respect for their institution or their by recasting their conception of its role as, properly, purveying patriotic lies?

The curators are not specialists in this particular subject, but they are now extremely well informed in the specialized historical literature on it. They know perfectly well that their version of history would not be accepted as remotely adequate--as being an acceptable brief or even simplified approximation, or

indeed as anything other than seriously misleading--by any historian who has made a special study of this episode.

(Is there a single exception to this? McCulloch's version in his biography of Truman seems widely recognized by such historians as superficial and even dishonest, part of a hagiography of Truman. The biographer of JFK who wrote on this? Rhodes? Some military historians?)

The issue is not (as MN attributed to Alperovitz, overstating his view, I think) that Truman or any advisors saw alternatives to the bomb--as such, in the same decision context--that were certain to produce unconditional surrender or even surrender on our "terms". The bomb didn't offer that prospect either.

Certainty was not really an issue: it was not presented as associated with any alternative (except invasion along with Soviet participation).

What nearly all officials actually perceived (a fact totally missing from this exhibit) was that one or a combination of approaches not including either bomb or invasion might produce a surrender, perhaps before August 6, and they believed that this was not only worth considering but worth trying--they strongly and repeatedly recommended it--in July, before the bombs were available. And this was rejected by Byrnes and Trumans: on reasoning that was known to all these officials (essentially, domestic controversy), but which did not convince them that the trial should not be made.

There is no evidence at all--on the contrary, for Truman--that either Truman or Byrnes disagreed with the assessments of these officials that these other approaches might work, either singly or in combination. (On several occasions, Truman said that he did agree, and even directed that they be prepared; but he was persuaded, twice, to postpone the initiative, and finally persuaded by Byrnes to drop it till after the bomb had been dropped).

Thus, the President and all his top officials, military and civilian (with the possible exception of Byrnes, whose attitude on this not known to us) believed that neither the bomb nor invasion was "necessary"--in the sense of "absolutely necessary," no acceptable Japanese surrender being attainable, possibly, without one or the other or both. That is the exact sense in which the exhibit conveys, falsely, that they did see either the bomb or invasion: or, to put it another way, the way they purportedly did see the bomb as "necessary" to avert an invasion, to achieve an acceptable surrender without an invasion. Or to do so "as early as possible" (to save the American lives being lost daily).

On the contrary: all these officials saw the bomb as possibly not necessary. They saw--and all except Byrnes recommended to the

President--approaches that might end the war acceptably without the bomb or invasion. (Not all of them--conceivably, not any of them, as Neufeld suggests, I believe incorrectly--because they had intense scruples about using the bomb or wished to avoid it "at all costs" or even at any great cost. At least some of these were as willing to use the bomb, if necessary, as anyone else; but they all preferred to try an approach that might end the war earlier than the bomb could be available. Thus, they were not so anxious to use the bomb--or to avoid domestic controversy about "clarifying" the surrender terms--that they were prepared to pass up a possible chance to end the war earlier than it could be used, at some cost in American lives and increasing the likelihood of Soviet entry into the war. (Byrnes and Truman accepted both of these costs, for reasons that subject to controversy).

Moreover, virtually all of these officials believed that one of these approaches, the offer to keep the Emperor, was itself probably necessary: that even the bomb would not be sufficient without it, even with Soviet entry: that a Japanese surrender would not be forthcoming without it. And all evidence indicates that this view was correct. Thus, since this offer might be sufficient, and was almost surely necessary (i.e., it would have to be made sooner or later), there seemed every advantage (except for domestic controversy: which did not seem likely to be prolonged, since it would probably be quelled shortly by victory, even if the offer was not immediately accepted: both Soviet entry and the bomb were in the offing) in trying it early and ending the war as soon as possible. So it seemed to Grew in late May (with Truman initially agreeing), and to Bard, McCloy and Leahy in June. Others preferred to wait till it could be combined with a warning on the bomb (after it had been tested successfully) and with announcement of imminent Soviet entry (Stimson: perhaps Forrestal; the JCS).

It was not: the bomb is not necessary, because this other approach is sure to work. It was: the bomb may not be necessary, because this other approach may work, sooner--perhaps averting Soviet entry, as well as shortening the daily losses in American lives and averting massive Japanese deaths either from more daily firebombings or from the bombs (for those who cared about the latter)--and the cost is negligible (except to politicians who intend to run for President: Truman and Byrnes). (Hull, too, thought that the offer should be postponed till after "the climax of the bombing"--presumably, the atomic bomb).

The choice by Truman and Byrnes is also consistent with Alperovitz's interpretation that they wanted to use the bomb and were willing to wait for this, keeping the war going (i.e., rejecting even costless initiatives that might end the war before the bomb could be used) for this purpose. (However, even if this was among their reasons for rejecting the recommended approach at Potsdam--as it probably was, I think--I'm not convinced that Alperovitz is right in writing off as another motive their concern

about domestic criticism).

Back to the Smithsonian. Having heard all this, and acknowledging that it is "reasonable and persuasive interpretation" of the alternatives perceived and presented by US officials, Neufeld still says that it is virtually impossible that it can be presented in their exhibit, or even that the exhibit can be changed so that it no longer asserts (falsely) the opposite, the negation of this view of the perceived alternatives. Because, he says, it is in particular this very view that the organized critics, the Air Force Association and the Legion, are determined to extirpate and suppress. (Not a coincidence, I would say: like the tobacco companies' determination, earlier on, to suppress any mention of a health hazard, or "responsible", authoritative assertion of this).

The particular, familiar, official "simplification" (falsification) of the decision-making context happens to be the only one that compellingly justifies, for the great mass of Americans, this slaughter. Even the exaggeration of the number of deaths to be expected in an invasion is probably essential to this (though the lower numbers would probably be seen as sufficient justification--every other element of the argument remaining the same--by many or most Americans, with perhaps some unease).

What are the stakes? For the aerospace and nuclear weapons industry, their product: strategic bombers and missiles, nuclear weapons: their image, their legitimacy, their continued development and production and military deployment. For the Air Force, its self-image and self-respect, its role, its budget. For the US Government--to a less central but still significant degree--its domestic and international authority and image, its influence, its leadership role. For Americans, self-respect and identity--the considerable degree these depend on identification with Presidential and military performance and character (as in My Lai, and Viet Nam generally). Big stakes: against historical truth, in this case (as in My Lai, or Vietnam).

On the other side: the need to delegitimize the bomb and its (further) use, to stop proliferation (and first, to stop promoting it), to move toward drastic reductions in the nuclear weapons states led by the United States, to achieve no-first-use commitments, to stop testing, to get extension of the NPT.

As in the case of tobacco and asbestos and Ford advertising, lives are at stake. Immensely more lives, potentially all or most of humanity (whose lives may be shortened by prevailing falsehoods on these matters, including false history like this). The only difference is that the lives are not being lost every day (except from past radiation, and some ongoing radiation). (No particular death can be surely traced to tobacco, or to a particular advertising campaign, either, for that matter: does that console

advertising officials?)

And in the case of the Smithsonian, unlike the ad agency (or the Department of Defense) there is also the matter of intellectual and scholarly standards, of truth-telling, an obligation not to tell lies and not knowingly to mislead. The current exhibition text does both. If the Smithsonian persists in this--as its curators expect (evidently washing their hands of it, at this point, on the grounds that "the decision has gone higher")--it is accepting a role as a propaganda arm of the government, or in effect, of the Air Force Association and the American Legion.